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A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, I guess I went and did it this time!! As noted in a message sent out earlier, this week's issue has been delayed a bit. I have a good excuse, however - I was in the hospital Thursday night, into Friday evening. Got home from work Thursday night, and start having some dizziness and numbness. It wouldn't go away, so I decided (with my wife's urging) that I better get checked out. I'm usually the type to just "walk it off" and I'll be fine kinda person. Not this time. So, I spent about 4 hours in the Emergency Room just waiting to see someone after my initial triage. Then I got to an exam room and spent another few with an intravenous drip and heart monitor. Every so often they'd take an EKG and a few vials of my blood. Initial diagnosis, or at least partial diagnosis was atrial fibrillation - an event with a rapid and irregular heartbeat. Another intravenous drip wasn't doing anything to fix the heartbeat, so they were considering shocking me to fix it. Fortunately they asked if I had ever had this happen before, and I had, some 25 years ago. At that time I was put on a medication which seemed to help. These guys decided to try a similar drug, which ended up helping. Now they wanted to keep me overnight, so I ended up in the hospital to monitor my condition.

Spent all day Friday with all kinds of intravenous tubes connected, and plenty of EKG electrodes connected everywhere. Not the most comfortable situation - every movement caused something to pull or get disconnected! I was supposed to have a few more tests, including an echocardigram (to check to see if there was any damage to my heart), but the tests didn't get scheduled. The docs figure atrial fibrillation, a heart murmur, and the possibility that I had had a very mild heart attack.

But, since they had my heartbeat under control, and I was feeling good, they weren't going to keep me through the weekend or longer until I could have the other tests. They don't know what caused my symptoms, and this all came on me suddenly because I felt fine at work (tired, but fine, as is the norm for me).

So, I get to take it easy for the weekend, but I can go back to work next week, with no restrictions. Hopefully once I get the other tests and see a cardiologist (never saw one while I was there!), I'll have a better idea of what happened and what my prognosis will be. I've got a couple of medications to take in the meantime, as a precaution.

I figured that I really wasn't in the right frame of mind to rush and finish up this week's issue to make it to the streets on Friday. Nor

did I really want to do so - rest and relaxation was more on the order of the day. So, here we are - some time this weekend getting A-ONE all finished up and ready to go.

Meanwhile, I feel fine. Tired, but fine. We'll see how things go over the next couple of weeks, I hope!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone, and there aren't a lot of messages in the NewsGroup, but we'll sit and talk and have a big old time anyway. Okay?

My commentary is going to be fairly short and sweet this week too. There's that terrible oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico that everyone's been watching (and let's NOT forget that it took the lives of 11 people too).

And then there's Arizona's new "immigration law"... you're probably not going to believe this, but I don't know enough about the law itself to have an informed opinion.

Sure, I know what both sides are saying, and I see merit on both sides. First, we DO need to be able to control immigration. On the other side, we can't have officials of any kind 'profiling' or asking for documentation just because someone looks or acts different.

If that's as far as it'd go, I probably wouldn't even have a problem with that. An honest law enforcement officer can often "tell" if there's a reason to single someone out. If you're trying to protect a plane full of passengers, let's face it; you don't focus on Al Gore. You focus on the dark-skinned guy with the thick Arab accent and the tee shirt that says "Death to America".

The problem is that it never "stays" there. There's too much room for an 'official' to say "well it looked to me like..."

I don't know about you, but history is too full of examples of... "who is an undesirable"... Look at immigration to the United States. The Chinese "coolie" workers, signs reading "No Irish Need Apply" during the potato famine, Italians, Poles, Catholics, Jews, you name it. It seems that there's always been a reason to dislike or mistrust SOMEONE. I would have thought that we'd have learned by now, but I guess not.

To be sure, the numbers of illegal immigrants in this country are staggering... one estimate I heard the other day put the number at more than 12 million. That equates to a little over three and a half percent of the population. That may not sound like much, but that's huge when you're talking about the population of a country.

It’s a fine line that must be trod, to be sure, but we must find a way to tread it. I don’t pretend to have the answers, but I don’t think that making it legal to single someone out because they look different is the answer either.

As I said, I don’t really know enough about this new law to have a valid opinion. For instance, I don’t know if the law REALLY makes it okay to just stop someone and ask for proof of citizenship for any reason, but that’s what’s being bandied about. And I DO see a lot of room for abuse of a law like that.

Only time will tell, I guess.

Okay, lemme talk a little bit about this oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

5,000 barrels of oil a day. That’s a lot of oil. That’s about a quarter of a million gallons of oil every day being pumped into the ocean. Now, the Gulf is a big place, to be sure, but let’s face it, that kind of spillage is huge no matter where you’re talking about. And this idea of burning off the oil? Well, that’d be terrific if we were talking about highly processed fuel oil or something, but we’re talking about unrefined crude... some of it so... yucky.. that it doesn’t even float. You can spray it with stuff to make it float, but then you’re left with ocean covered with oil and stuff that you sprayed on it.

But back to burning it off... that’d be fine if it was highly purified stuff that all burnt up. But it’s not. It’s nasty, tarry, yucky sludge, and the stuff that you can burn will only.. modify the rest of what’s left and make it worse. And maybe you CAN scrape most of it up after, but there’s always going to be stuff left dissolved in the water... stuff that’s going to be taken in by plankton and sperm whales and fish and shrimp and crabs... from one end of the food chain to the other. Of course, the officials at BP will just get their shrimp and Mahi Mahi from somewhere else and count themselves lucky that they ’only’ had to pay <x> million dollars in penalties. Meanwhile, the slick has now touched down along the coast of Louisiana.

And for those of you who take comfort in the fact that we have laws and regulations to handle such things, think about this...

The Exxon Valdez oil spill happened 21 years ago... and Exxon is STILL holding off on paying the fines and penalties for the spill and cleanup.

Well, I’ve said about all I have to say. Let’s meet up again next week. Till then, keep your ear to the ground, your eye on the horizon, your shoulder to the wheel and your back to the wall. Yeah, good luck with that. [grin] But no matter what you do this week, make sure you always listen so you’ll be sure to hear what they’re saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Here We Go Again With Banning Games!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Activision Locks Up 'Halo' Creators!
Call of Duty 7 Unveiled As 'Black Ops'
And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Top Court To Rule on California Video Game Law

The U.S. Supreme Court said on Monday it would decide whether a California law banning the sale and rental of violent video games to minors violated constitutional free-speech rights, the first time it will rule on a video game case.

The justices agreed to hear the state's appeal after a U.S. appeals court in California struck down the law, which also imposes strict video-game labeling requirements, as unconstitutional.

The high court is expected to hear arguments in the case and then issue a ruling during its upcoming term, which begins in October. It will be one of the most important cases the court has thus far decided to hear in the upcoming term.

The law has been challenged by video game publishers, distributors and sellers, including the Entertainment Software Association. Its members include Disney Interactive Studios, Electronic Arts, Microsoft Corp and Sony Computer Entertainment America.

In appealing to the Supreme Court, the state argued the free-speech guarantees of the First Amendment do not bar a state from prohibiting the sale of violent video games to minors under 18.

The state also argued that the appeals court was wrong to require it to show a direct link between violent video games and physical and psychological harm to minors.

The law, adopted in 2005, has never taken effect because of the legal challenge.

"It is time to allow California's common-sense law to go into effect and help parents protect their children from violent video games," California Attorney General Jerry Brown said.

The appeal argued that violent material in video games should be subject to the same legal standard the courts have used to prohibit the sale of sexually explicit material to minors.

The Supreme Court has never addressed whether violent material sold to children can be treated the same as sexually explicit material.

The law defines a violent video game as one that depicts "killing, maiming, dismembering or sexually assaulting an image of a human being." Anyone who sells a violent video game to a minor can be fined as much as $1,000.

Michael Gallagher, president and chief executive of the Entertainment Software Association, which represents U.S. computer and video game publishers, said the group looks forward to presenting its arguments and defending the industry's works.

"Courts throughout the country have ruled consistently that content-based regulation of computer and video games is unconstitutional. Research shows that the public agrees; video games should be provided the same protections as books, movies and music," he said.

The Supreme Court agreed to decide the California case after last week's ruling that struck down a U.S. law that bans videos depicting animal cruelty for violating constitutional free-speech rights.

California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger said he looked forward to the Supreme Court upholding the law.

"We have a responsibility to our kids and our communities to protect against the effects of games that depict ultra-violent actions, just as we already do with movies," he said.

Activision Locks Up 'Halo' Creators for 10 Years

Activision Blizzard Inc., currently embroiled in a legal shootout with two of its former game developers, has locked up the makers of "Halo" in an exclusive 10-year deal.

The company said Thursday it will bring to market the next big action game universe from Bungie, the video game studio behind "Halo," "Myth," and "Marathon."

It marks Bungie's first such partnership since breaking off from Microsoft in 2007.

Under the deal, Activision will have exclusive worldwide rights to publish and distribute all future Bungie games based on the universe on multiple platforms and devices.

Jason Jones, who co-founded Bungie in 1991 and led the creation of "Halo," is heading up the development team.

Multiple game releases and the creation of an online community are also part of the deal, executives said.

"We certainly think of the success we've built in 'Halo' over the last 10 years as a minimum bar for the success we plan multiples of in the future," Harold Ryan, president of Bungie, said in an interview.

Thomas Tippl, Activision's chief operating officer, said Bungie laid out a compelling vision of the universe. "When it's ready and when we're talking about it, I think you will be blown away," he said.

Tippl described an ongoing legal battle with Jason West and Vince Zampella, top executives at game studio Infinity Ward, as "unfortunate and unique."

The two men have said they were fired recently by Activision so the company could avoid paying hefty royalties on last fall's hugely popular "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2." Activision has said in a countersuit that it fired them for insubordination and trying to poach key employees.

"I think the Infinity Ward situation is unique and unfortunate but it is not going to change our strategy nor our ability to attract the best talent in the industry," Tippl said.

He also said profit margins on game publishing, above 20 percent in fiscal 2009, would be helped by the new partnership.

Activision is majority owned by France's Vivendi SA.

Call of Duty 7 Unveiled As 'Black Ops'

In a short but sweet reveal, game developer Treyarch cracked the lid on the seventh Call of Duty title, dubbing it Black Ops and teasing a release date of November 9, 2010. Expectations were that Activision would reveal the game's title tonight on SpikeTV, but the game dev opted to lead early with the title and launch date this morning.

In the World's Shortest Blog Post, Treyarch writes "We at Treyarch are excited to reveal our latest development - Call of Duty: Black Ops! Be sure to head over to CallOfDuty.com/blackops as more details begin to unfold! Follow @JD_2020 on Twitter for the latest news & discussions regarding Black Ops."

I guess we're still on for tonight's teaser trailer, airing at 12:40 a.m. (time zone unspecified) according to Treyarch's debut Twitter status update 20 hours ago.

What of the name? Well for starters, Black Ops doesn't sound very World War II. Alternate Call of Duty developer Infinity Ward's two biggest revenue rainmakers - Modern Warfare and its recent sequel - take place in contemporary settings. It stands to reasons Treyarch wants in on that action, and with terrorism the watchword in the U.S. these days, you can already imagine the potential settings, from Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, or the Balkans to Venezuela, Colombia, Angola, or Zimbabwe, and various hot spots in the Middle East.

US Boy Scouts Issues Awards for Videogame Mastery

The Boy Scouts of America have expanded their awards for outdoor activities such as tent pitching and tying knots to include videogame dexterity and ratings awareness, a group spokesman told AFP on Thursday.

The new awards program gives the seven-to-11-year-old Cub Scouts members "belt loop and pins" for mastery of Playstation, X-Box and Wii video games, but the children must also prove they understand the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) ratings.

The ratings system recommends video games appropriate to a child's age "so we can arm the parents with good information, how to make the determination if its something they want," Boy Scouts spokesman Renee Fairrer told AFP.

"Video games are in two-thirds of American homes. That's a pretty good number of people; they are in our schools, in most libraries," he said, explaining the reason behind the new awards program.

And the Boy Scouts are sure video games will not turn their younger members into couch potatoes.

"We have 53 programs and 28 of them are sports related like skateboard, rollers, hockey. It's a good balance," Fairrer said.

A Job in Video Games Might Not Be a Virtual Dream

If your dream job is to work in the video game industry then the future is looking brighter with industry players seeing a pick-up in the number of jobs becoming available although salaries remain flat.

"Hiring is up from last year, but the market is rough," said Marc Mencher, president of Gamerecruiters.com.

"Unfortunately, we have roughly 12,000 unemployed in the North American game segment. But with strong growth in the casual MMO (massively multiplayer online) and social games segment, we do see a pick-up in hiring."

Salaries, however, are yet to follow upwards as the industry starts to recover after video game sales fell 8 percent in the United States last year amid the global financial crisis.

Game Developer Research's ninth annual Game Developer Salary Survey found the average American mainstream videogame industry salary in 2009 was $75,573, which was a decline of more than 4 percent from 2008's figure of $79,000.

"Overall, game salaries have risen 24 percent from an average of $60,833 in 2001, the first year we began studying developers' salaries," said Chris Remo, the co-director of Game Developer Research and Editor-at-Large at Gamasutra.com.

"For the most part since then, salaries have either risen or remained flat on a year-on-year basis, with the only exceptions being this past year, and a 1 percent decline from 2005 to 2006."

After a record game industry average salary in 2008, this past year saw the first case on record of a significant average salary decrease as consumer confidence suffered in the midst of a recession and employers looked to cut costs where possible.

Despite the recent dip, 2009 still boasts the second-highest average salary ever.

It's not unusual for videogame developers to be making $80,000 to

$150,000 a year," said Dr. Peter Raad, executive director of The Guildhall at Southern Methodist University, a leading graduate level game design program.

"That money typically comes from three different buckets, including base salary, profit sharing and bonuses tied to a specific game."

According to the recent survey which focused solely on average salaries, programmers are the highest paid creative talent in the game industry with an average annual salary of $80,320. Those who work their way up to technical directors with six or more years of experience took in an average of $121,750.

Programmers turn millions of lines of code into colorful characters like Mario and photorealistic battlefields.

Artists and animators actually saw a slight 2 percent increase in salaries in 2009 with an average salary of $71,071.

The art department is responsible for bringing game characters, objects and worlds to life from early sketches to the finishing touches on in-game 3D models.

Like artists, game designers saw a modest salary bump on average, up 3 percent to $69,266. The design discipline also includes writers, who make an average of $61,786, a figure right in line with the average design salary of $61,859.

These creative forces are charged with taking a game idea and turning it into a fun and engaging video game.

Video game producers earned an average salary of $75,082 last year. Much like Hollywood producers, video game producers are charged with bringing games in on time and on budget by overseeing the various departments of the development team.

One of the best avenues into the videogame industry remains Quality Assurance (QA) testers, who are the team members who play the game over and over to fine-tune the gameplay experience and fix any glitches.

QA testers made an average salary of $37,905 in 2009, but many testers move on to other jobs within a game studio and those who stay on more than six years can see their salary double.

Outside of the creative development teams, the highest paid jobs in the video game industry are in the business and marketing department. Despite a 6 percent decline from 2008, the average salary was $96,408.

Remo expects game industry salaries to rebound.

"Although the economy has been responsible for some layoffs at various studios, I am personally aware of many who are still hiring," said Cliff Bleszinski, design director at Epic Games, which is developing new games "Gears of War 3" and "Bulletstorm."

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Europe Considers New Cybercrime Agency

European ministers are considering establishing a new agency that would tie together law enforcement agencies and other entities dedicated to fighting cybercrime.

The Council of the European Union, composed of ministers from 27 countries, issued a document earlier this week calling for the European Commission to draw up a feasibility study on the idea.

The ministers released a set of goals they'd like to achieve over time. One of those is to gain more ratifications of the Council of Europe's Cybercrime Convention, the only international treaty covering computer crime.

The treaty requires countries to adopt cybercrime laws, have contacts available 24 hours a day for fast-breaking investigations and other measures.

Another medium-term goal focuses on revocation of domain names and IP (Internet protocol) addresses. The document doesn't spell out exactly the ministers' objectives there, as it is already standard procedure for many ISPs to shut down Web sites linked with bad behavior.

The new agency would also be tasked with forging stronger bonds between various law enforcement and other organizations that deal with cybercrime, including Europol, Eurojust, Interpol and others.

"The centre might also evaluate and monitor the preventive and investigative measures to be carried out," the document reads. "This feasibility study should consider, in particular, the aim, scope and possible financing of the centre and whether it should be located at Europol."

A focus would also be placed on helping police, judges and prosecutors help meet standards for carry out "technological investigations as well as those needed by trainers in this field."

Other tasks would include generating annual reports about cybercrime in Europe and advising the Commission and Council of Ministers in "drafting of recommendations or rules designed to fight cybercrime globally."

Senators See Privacy Problem in Facebook Expansion

Four U.S. senators want Facebook to make it easier for its more than 400 million users to protect their privacy as the website develops new outlets to share personal information.

The call for simpler privacy controls came in a letter that the senators

plan to send Tuesday to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. The Associated Press obtained a draft of the letter signed by Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y.; Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo; Sen. Mark Begich, D-Alaska; and Sen. Al Franken, D.-Minn.

It marks the second time in the past three days that Schumer has expressed his misgivings about a series of changes that Facebook announced last week. The new features are designed to unlock more of the data that the online hangout has accumulated about people during its six-year history.

Schumer sent a letter Sunday to the Federal Trade Commission calling for regulators to draw up clearer privacy guidelines for Facebook and other Internet social networks to follow.

The political pressure threatens to deter Facebook’s efforts to put its stamp on more websites, a goal that could yield more moneymaking opportunities for the privately held company.

Facebook’s expansion "raises new concerns for users who want to maintain control over their information," the senators wrote in their preliminary draft.

In a statement late Monday, Facebook spokesman Andrew Noyes said the company wants to meet with Schumer to explain its commitment to privacy.

"We’ve developed powerful tools to give our users control over what information they want to share, when they want to share it and with whom," Noyes said.

Among other things, Facebook is plugging into other websites so people can communicate their interests with their online entourages. Facebook also tweaked its own website to create more pages where people’s biographical information could be exposed to a wider audience.

Before personal information can be shared with other websites, the senators want Facebook to seek users’ explicit consent, a process known as "opting in." Facebook currently can share some personal information with websites unless individual users opt out by telling the company they don’t want those details to be passed along.

The senators also object to Facebook’s decision to allow other businesses store users’ data for more than 24 hours.

Zuckerberg, who turns 26 next month, says he just wants to build more online avenues for people to connect with their friends and family. Some of his previous efforts have been detoured by privacy concerns, most notably in 2007 when Facebook users revolted against notification tool, called Beacon, that broadcast their activities on dozens of websites.

Facebook responded to that rebellion by giving people more control over Beacon before scrapping the program completely.

Hacker of Sarah Palin’s E-mail Found Guilty

A college student who hacked into former Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin’s e-mail account and posted some of its contents on the Internet was found guilty Friday.

After four days of deliberations, a federal jury found David Kernell, the 22-year-old son of a Democratic Tennessee state legislator, guilty of obstruction of justice, a felony, and unauthorized access of a computer, a misdemeanor.

Kernell was cleared of a wire fraud charge, and the jury could not agree on a verdict on a charge of identity theft.

Judge Thomas Phillips declared a mistrial on the identity theft charge but did not set a date for sentencing.

The obstruction charge alone carries a prison sentence of up to 20 years, while the misdemeanor count is punishable by up to one year in jail.

Palin issued a statement on her Facebook page, thanking the jury and prosecutors and explaining the case’s importance.

"Besides the obvious invasion of privacy and security concerns surrounding this issue, many of us are concerned about the integrity of our country’s political elections. America’s elections depend upon fair competition," the statement said.

"Violating the law, or simply invading someone’s privacy for political gain, has long been repugnant to Americans’ sense of fair play. As Watergate taught us, we rightfully reject illegally breaking into candidates’ private communications for political intrigue in an attempt to derail an election."

A subdued Kernell had no comment, and he was released on bond while barred from using a computer except for school assignments and e-mail.

Kernell’s attorney had argued during the weeklong trial the hacking of Palin’s e-mail account amounted to nothing more than a college prank, but prosecutors said Kernell had hoped to derail the Republican’s campaign.

Palin and her daughter Bristol each testified about the disruption the break-in had caused to both their personal lives and the campaign.

"If there’s any unauthorized access to computers, the Department of Justice takes that very seriously," said prosecutor Mark Krotoski after the verdict was announced in U.S. District Court.

In September 2008, Kernell did a little research and some guesswork to answer security questions and gain access to Palin’s personal e-mail account. At the time, published reports had questioned whether the then-Alaska governor had improperly used her personal e-mail to conduct official business.

Kernell said he found nothing incriminating, but posted some of the account’s contents online, along with a new password he assigned it.

"The conduct was serious," Krotoski said. "He had every opportunity to pull out and not proceed."

ICANN Approves First Four Internationalized Country Domains

ICANN, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, has approved the first four country-code domain names written in non-Latin script, it announced Tuesday.

All existing top-level domain names are written using the "Latin" alphabet, the 26 letters from A to Z. That system is just fine for Internet users in English-speaking countries, but not for those countries for which the official language is written using other scripts, such as the Russian Cyrillic characters, Arabic script or Chinese pictograms. European countries such as Osterreich (Austria) or Espana (Spain) also have problems with the Latin alphabet, as they use accented characters to spell their official name in their own language.

There are several kinds of top-level domains (TLDs): generic ones (gTLDs) such as .com, .net or .org, special-purpose ones such as .aero or .museum, and the two-letter country code domains (ccTLDs) such as .fr (France) or .uk (United Kingdom).

The first four countries to be allowed to write their country-code top-level domain names in their own script are Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. They will retain their existing Latin-alphabet ccTLDs such as
.ru (Russia).

Other countries awaiting approval for ccTLDs in their own scripts include China, Jordan, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

For some years, ICANN has been working on an enhancement to the DNS (Domain Name System) to allow internationalized domain names (IDNs), or domain names written in non-Latin scripts. There are a number of technical challenges - most notably that the DNS infrastructure is designed only to handle domain names written with the Latin alphabet.

The IDNs, regardless of the script or language they represent, will all be stored as a series of Latin characters beginning xn - followed by an encoded sequence representing the name. Thus, the IDN for Russia will be stored as xn - p1ai while that for Egypt will be stored as xn - wgbh1c.

It will be left to the browser or other client software to convert the underlying TLD into the appropriate script for display. ICANN hosts a test page to check whether a browser already support this function.

PDF Exploits Bloom in the Spring

Numerous reports of new malicious PDFs have come out in the last few days. They all seem a little different and, while there are no new vulnerabilities in them, there are some new techniques.

The TrendLabs Malware Blog describes a PDF that it found, which exploits two different patched vulnerabilities. If you are running current Adobe software, you are not vulnerable. But if you do get exploited, the PDF decodes an embedded XML file containing a malicious TIFF file.

One of the vulnerabilities involved, the more recent one, exploits a flaw in Adobe’s handling of TIFF files. At this point, the malware works as a

simple downloader, pulling other malware from the Web and executing it.

A different malicious PDF found by Sunbelt Software comes attached to a spam message. Run it and it uses the "/LAUNCH" feature (not bug) of a PDF recently found by researcher Didier Stevens which, after confirming with the user, runs an embedded executable.

In this case, the embedded executable is malicious and the PDF employs a form of the "/LAUNCH" feature, which Adobe has not yet addressed. The warning in the dialog box from Acrobat before the executable is launched can be modified by the PDF, and the actions taken in response to the user clicking the buttons changed. Whichever choice you make, bad things happen.

Bottom line from Sunbelt: don't click on attachments in spam.

It's worth noting here, that while Adobe hasn't changed its software in response to the "/LAUNCH" issue, it did issue guidance for how you can limit or block the feature if you wish. Also, Stevens recently modified his PDFID utility to identify PDFs that employ the "/LAUNCH" feature.

IBM's Internet Security Systems X-Force blog describes the same "/LAUNCH" exploit with some more detail.

Two weeks ago, M86 Security Labs reported a similar malicious PDF using "/LAUNCH." What was noteworthy about the report was that the malware installed in the attack was the Zeus data-stealing bot. Malicious PDFs are new territory for Zeus.

The most important thing to know about all these attacks is that by keeping your software up-to-date and not blindly clicking on unsolicited attachments, you can protect yourself, at least to a significant degree. Add updated malware protection to the mix and it's even harder for attacks to succeed.

Israel Ends Ban on iPad

Israel on Sunday lifted a ban on Apple Inc.'s popular iPad tablet computer, ending restrictions that had been imposed over concerns the gadget's wireless signal could disrupt other devices.

Communications Ministry officials conducted "intensive technical scrutiny in a controlled laboratory" before deciding to allow the iPad into the country, said Yechiel Shabi, a ministry spokesman.

Israel announced the ban shortly after the iPad's April 3 launch in the U.S. Officials said at least 10 of the flat, touchscreen computers were seized at the country's international airport. Shabi said owners of the confiscated iPads would be permitted to retrieve them.

Israeli standards mirror those of many European nations, but Israel has been the only country to ban iPad imports ahead of the product's international release. Apple has delayed the launch until late May, citing heavy sales in the U.S.

The iPad combines the features of a notebook computer with the touch-pad functions of the iPod.

The ban prompted grumbling from Israeli tech enthusiasts and software developers in a country that is widely considered to be a technology powerhouse.

Shabi said the Communications Ministry quickly reached out to Apple to seek more information about the machine's wireless signals.

"Of course, in the mainstream media, it was bad PR and we didn't like this," Shabi said. "But we said we would test it and it took us a week. I think that is very fast."

The ministry has denied the ban had anything to do with concern that the signal could cause interference to signals of military equipment, as one lawmaker, Robert Ilatov, told the Haaretz newspaper last week.

"We have nothing against Apple products. We like the iPhone here in Israel," Shabi said.

Boobs Big on Facebook As Women Take on Iran Cleric

Breasts were big on Facebook on Monday as a female blogger called on women to prove wrong an Iranian cleric who preached that cleavage causes earthquakes.

More than 55,000 people were backing the official "Boobquake" page of Jennifer McCreight, a self-described "geeky, perverted atheist feminist" putting her D-cup breasts where her mouth is.

McCreight, who lives in the US state of Indiana, used the world's leading social network and microblogging service Twitter to enlist women worldwide to test the cleric's assertion that sexy women can make the ground shake.

"Many women who do not dress modestly ... lead young men astray, corrupting their chastity and spread adultery in society, which (consequently) increases earthquakes," Hojatoleslam Kazem Sedighi was quoted last week as saying by Iranian media.

What started as a barbed poke at what she saw as bad science on the cleric's part won a passionate following as it bounced around the Internet, and by Monday a pair of Boobquake rallies were planned.

McCreight, a university senior majoring in genetics, chose a titillating low-cut red blouse with spaghetti string straps for the day, posting a photo of herself at her blog online at blaghag.com.

"I encourage other female skeptics to join me and embrace the supposed supernatural power of their breasts," McCreight said on the Boobquake Facebook page. "Or short shorts, if that's your preferred form of immodesty."

Tech Trouble Causing Computer Stress Syndrome

Crashing machines, slow boot times, and agony dealing with technical support

have Digital Age people suffering from Computer Stress Syndrome, a study available online Tuesday found.

"Today’s digitally-dependent consumers are increasingly overwhelmed and upset with technical glitches and problems in their daily lives," a communications industry think tank said in a report entitled "Combating Computer Stress Syndrome."

The report identified sources of peoples’ pain as "frustrating, complex computers and devices, technical failures, viral infections, and long waits to resolve support issues."

Findings were based on a survey of more than 1,000 people in North America by a Customer Experience Board created by the Chief Marketing Officer Council to look into how to keep customers happy in the highly competitive communications sector.

"The reality is that numerous, persistent problems are troubling most computer users, creating unnecessary anguish and anxiety as a result," the study found.

"Digitally dependent users are getting fed up and frustrated with the current state of computer related stress, and clearly looking for a better way to address and reduce it."

Ninety-four percent of those surveyed said they depend on computers in their personal lives.

Nearly two-thirds of computer users have needed to contact technical support or have experienced Computer Stress Syndrome (CSS) in the past year, according to the study.

"Users face a continuous state of technical anxiety and challenge such as setting up new computer products, keeping up with software upgrades and migrating to new applications and operating systems, as well as dealing with malware infections, web threats, identity theft and more," the study said.

Forty percent of computer users have experienced system failures in the past year and more than half have had to reach out for help fixing technical problems, according to Pew Center Research cited in the report.

"Because they are so important to us, computers are a two-edged sword," said Murray Feingold, a US physician credited in the study with giving CSS its label.

"When they are functioning properly, they’re great. But when something goes wrong, we immediately go into panic - This is what I call the Computer Stress Syndrome."

The study highlights the importance of making it less vexing to use modern-day gadgets, according to board spokeswoman Liz Miller.

"We think it is about time that a lot of these technology companies really start to pay attention to where consumer stress and pain points are to create better experiences," Miller told AFP.

Sony to End Floppy Disk Production

The floppy disk, already abandoned by most computer users, has been pushed closer to extinction by a Sony decision to end manufacturing of the storage media this early next year.

Sony, one of a handful of companies that still sells floppy disk media in Japan, will end sales of floppy disks by March 2011 due to dwindling demand.

The Japanese domestic floppy disk market amounted to about 12 million disks last year, of which Sony had a 70 percent share, it said. A 10-pack of Sony 3.5-inch floppy disks costs ¥570 (US$6) at a central Tokyo electronics store.

Many of the remaining customers are legacy equipment users in the education and research sectors, said Sony.

Demand for the disks peaked in the mid-nineties when the most popular type of floppy, the "HD" disk, offered 1.44MB of storage space, but it began to fall in the latter part of the nineties when the more durable and higher capacity CD-R and CD-RW formats reached the mass market. In contrast to the small capacity of the floppy disk, a CD could hold 650MB so offered obvious benefits to users. In recent years USB memory sticks have become popular for transporting data between computers.

To put the floppy market in perspective, consider those 12 million disks sold in Japan last year. Together they can hold about 17GB of data, which isn’t even enough to fill a single-sided Blu-ray Disc.

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